

# Downtown's Hidden Attraction

Public places are the stage where our public lives unfold. They are the parks where celebrations are held, where children play, and where cultures mix. They are the sidewalks in front of homes and businesses where we run into our friends, where social and economic exchanges take place. They are the “front porches” of our public institutions—libraries, community centers, city hall, hospitals the post office—where we play our important roles as neighbors and citizens. People living in cities with thriving public spaces enjoy a strong sense of community; people that lack thriving public spaces feel less connected to one another.

Good public places are what make cities great. All cities need vital destinations that establish a positive identity and that attract new residents, businesses and investment. A good destination might be a main street, a downtown park or waterfront, a library, coffee shop, or the square in front of a church—anywhere people like to gather.

One spot in downtown Rochester is key. If Peace Plaza and Annenberg Plaza were linked by an improved First Street, a major destination could be created, connecting First and Second Avenues. First Street could become a “promenade” that joins not only these plazas but also many other potentially great places downtown, functioning as the heart of a revitalized downtown district. First Street is flanked by two key destinations for both tourists and residents: the Kahler and Marriott Hotels. Both of these hotels feature restaurants and shops that link into both the skyway and the subway systems, as well as nearby Mayo Clinic facilities. The Galleria at the east end of First Street is a significant shopping destination and the Barnes & Noble bookstore located in a grand old movie theater is clearly a major attraction. The new Gonda Building of Mayo Clinic draws many people downtown for work or medical services.

While there are many opportunities, there are also many challenges. The main problem is that this area of downtown currently does not generate much public activity. The places for people to go after work are not obvious or inviting; the blank walls on the ground floors of many buildings offer little of interest for pedestrians to look at or to draw people in. There are few amenities that support the kind of lively street life that occurs in other cold-weather cities such as Duluth, Stillwater, or even Fargo, North Dakota. If even modest improvements were made, the downtown experience for both visitors and residents could be greatly enhanced. And downtown Rochester's hidden attraction could become the place that both locals and visitors will gather and savor an authentic, enjoyable, urban experience.